

Now More Than Ever: Expanding Access to Justice in Times of Crisis

Selections from the 29th Annual Edward V. Sparer Symposium

Thomas Jefferson said, “There is a debt of service due from every man to his country.” Presenters and attendees at the 29th Annual Edward V. Sparer Symposium, “Now More than Ever: Expanding Access to Justice in Times of Crisis,” all recognized the importance of that mandate. They also recognized that, like any debt, public services must be paid for, a task made increasingly difficult by the lagging economy.

We all know that tight resources have always been a problem for the public interest law community; the recent economic crisis has only emphasized the problem further. Foreclosures and high unemployment have deeply affected our nation’s poor, and brought many working class families into their numbers. Our already strapped public defenders and legal services agencies have found themselves struggling to serve more, with less.

When the recession is over, this problem will not go away. The knee-jerk reaction to widespread crises can spark incredible change, but, like any reflex, attentiveness only persists for a moment. Yet no one goes into public interest law because they are afraid of a challenge. Ours is to make the most of this moment.

This year’s Symposium strove to be current and relevant, but also to look forward, into the future. We have seen homelessness, hunger and unemployment swell. But we have also seen the public interest community rallying, using the crisis to become better; seeing it as an opportunity, not a setback. With fewer resources to go around, we have seen a truly encouraging re-imagining of legal services and their provision, and the participants at the Symposium represented an impressive breath of innovative leaders who shared with us what they have learned and helped us develop strategies to continue to serve the indigent as efficiently and effectively as we can. We hope that by, in turn, sharing their work with you, we will invigorate the public interest legal community and encourage creative, innovative models for better serving client needs.

The problems of our nation's poor will not disappear, even when headlines no longer lament a nationwide economic crisis; but neither will the spirit of the public interest community. The Sparer Symposium, like the Journal of Law and Social Change, has a tradition of bringing together committed academics and practitioners to engage in a dialogue that informs their practice and helps them develop new skills, strategies, and aspirations. Now more than ever we need to be re-examining what we have, re-envisioning what we want, and working together to make it happen.

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